

The Story of Marconi

Marconi: a Biography. By W. P. Jolly. Pp. 292 + 24 photographs. (Constable: London, October 1972.) £3.95.

AN account of Marconi's early life inevitably reads like a compendium of biographical clichés. He was fourteen years old, and a scholastic failure, when Hertz discovered radio waves, yet he became the first person to harness them for communication. His father disapproved of his early experiments but his mother believed in him, and came with him to England when the authorities in his native Italy refused to sponsor him; within eighteen months he was back, a celebrity. He transmitted a radio signal across the Atlantic when established wisdom said it should have flown out into space, and he won a Nobel prize for physics after failing to gain entry to university.

Professor Jolly's impressively researched biography brings depth to this story without sacrificing readability, and his perceptive analysis makes Marconi's achievements credible without diminishing them. Radio in the 1890s, involving

a small number of imperfectly understood variables, is seen as being susceptible to empirical improvement by a resourceful and determined experimenter with no theoretical interest to distract or inhibit him. There are generous digressions to impart background information, and it is only very occasionally that these irritate by straying too far from the point.

Money was not of primary interest to Marconi, but the company that he founded to further the development of "wireless telegraphy" was often criticized for its aggressive business methods. Professor Jolly comments, with characteristic pithiness:

"... the fact that the company was based on scientific innovation did not relieve it of the need to advertise, to impress investors, and to confuse competitors. Such ordinary commercial requirements precluded running the company as though it were some sort of sub-branch of a learned society, which was apparently what many critics of its methods wished."

Whatever the ethics of the Marconi Company, the author establishes from its archives, and from those of the Public Record Office, that both the Post Office and the Admiralty countered by engaging in decidedly sharp practice.

The success of the company was, of course, largely due to the work of its engineers, and readers familiar with the history of radio will be disappointed to find that such distinguished men as C. S. Franklin and H. J. Round receive little mention in this book; the reader may overcome this omission by referring to W. J. Baker's *A History of the Marconi Company* (1970), but it is nevertheless regrettable. Though technical matters tend to be played down, they are lucidly dealt with, thanks to the author's professional background in electronics. There are, however, two unfortunate slips: Hertz's transmitting apparatus is incorrectly described, whilst early long-range telegraphy is stated to have used wavelengths of "hundreds of metres", whereas in fact wavelengths of several thousand metres were always employed.

The book's longest chapter is devoted to the "Marconi scandal" of 1912-13. This concerned completely unfounded allegations that a Government contract had been corruptly awarded to the Marconi Company, and distorted allegations (though with some basis of fact) that ministers had used their privileged position to speculate profitably in Marconi shares.

Marconi himself was concerned only insofar as his name was inevitably besmirched, but the affair caused a great outcry and came close to wrecking Lloyd George's career. This complex story is skilfully summarized.

The years after 1918 saw one of

Marconi's greatest triumphs—the development of the short-wave "beam" system—yet it was basically a period of decline. Many distinguished people paid social visits to Marconi's luxury yacht, which was also his floating laboratory. Lord Mountbatten, then a specialist in radio, was one of those able to ask his host specific questions, and is quoted as recollecting: "The impression I had was that at this stage, which I think was about 1926, he had lost close contact with all the developments, although they were being carried out under his aegis."

Marconi was a shy man, unexcitable in spite of his Irish/Italian parentage; in later life he became increasingly withdrawn, and no attempt is made to present him as a colourful personality. Neither is great emphasis given to the long, slow decay of his first marriage, or to his numerous love affairs, though they are treated with sensitivity and insight.

Professor Jolly has gathered much valuable material, particularly from the Marconi Company's own archives. Notwithstanding its considerable scholarship, the book is written in a straightforward, unforced style, and can thus be recommended to specialist and general reader alike.

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